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# Teaching Trans\*: Transparent as a Strategy in English Language Arts Classrooms

*Joseph D. Sweet and David Lee Carlson*

Though trans\* people represent only 0.3% of the total US population, they receive much attention in the media and in public and scholarly discourse. The popularity of the critically acclaimed Amazon series *Transparent* confirms that trans\* experiences are integral to the lives of the cisgender population.

*Transparent* problematizes sociological and historical constructs of gender and sexuality. It depicts the intimate life of a transwoman, Maura, and her family as they try to manage their relationships in the midst of their own burgeoning gender and sexual fluidity. *Transparent* also offers a specific opportunity to open conversations about trans\* experiences. Its themes undermine notions of a gender binary, and its popularity suggests that the show offers significant potential for engendering public conversation and education about trans\* identities.

Given the difficulties that trans\* students face and how popular *Transparent* is, we are compelled to wonder how schools—and in particular, secondary schools—can capitalize on the popularity of the show to inform adolescents about being trans\* and potentially help reduce some of the physical and verbal assaults trans\* people suffer. The research question that guides this paper thus is, How can English Language Arts (ELA) teachers use the popularity and pedagogy of *Transparent* to educate adolescents about trans\* experiences?

In order to address this question, we create classroom lessons that are grounded in methods of teaching English (Burke, 2012; Milner, Milner, & Mitchell, 2012), incorporate scenes from the television show, and align with ninth- and tenth-grade Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in ELA<sup>1</sup>. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how ELA curriculum can use scenes from *Transparent* to inform adolescents about the experiences of being trans\*.

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the CCSS in ELA is available at National Governors Association and Council of Chief School Officers. (2010). Common core state standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects. Retrieved from [http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA\\_Standards1.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA_Standards1.pdf)

## Trans\* Youth Experiences

In recent years, trans\* adolescents have become increasingly visible in their schools and communities, yet the classroom remains a space that perpetuates heteronormative discourses and practices (Miller, 2015a). In fact, recent scholarship has shown that school communities reproduce heteronormative discourses in order to compel gender-variant children into gender conformity (Blackburn, 2006; Connell, 2005; Halberstam, 1998; Kimmel, 2012). As more and more gender- and sexually fluid students come out in schools, school communities must do more to educate all of their stakeholders about trans\* people in order to ameliorate some of the conditions that trans\* people endure.

The Williams Institute, a think tank at UCLA's School of Law, recently published a report that detailed some disturbing trends for trans\* people (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). The harrowing difficulties trans\* people face as they interact with the world continue to be at the center of their lived experiences.

Some of the issues trans\* people contend with involve local, state, and federal antidiscrimination laws that fail to protect them from employment, custody, and housing discrimination. Other difficulties involve challenges to permitting trans\* individuals to use a public bathroom that aligns with their gender identity even when the restroom does not match their sex assigned at birth (Girshick, 2008; Halberstam, 1998; Ingrey, 2012; Rassmussen, 2009). This issue remains important, especially when trans\* people have to live as their “authentic”<sup>2</sup> gender for at least one year prior to having gender-affirmation surgery (Teich, 2012).

As the trans\* population continues to rise, 75% of trans\* youth report being harassed in school (K-12), 35% report being physically assaulted in school, 12% report being sexually assaulted, and 14% report dropping out of school as a result of prolonged harassment (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). Teich (2012) similarly writes that trans\* youth experience verbal and physical abuse and continual bullying in schools. The most current information regarding harassment at schools indicates that “90 percent of transgender students reported hearing fellow students comment about someone not being masculine enough or feminine enough on a regular basis” (Teich, 2012, p. 105). This suggests that the likelihood of trans\* students being harassed in schools remains high.

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2 *Transparent* writer Our Lady J speaks of her “authentic gender” and “authentic self” to refer to her real gender as a woman. Thus, we use her term to distinguish between the gender performance of passing and the gender performance after coming out as trans\* (authentic).

More troubling is the low percentage (11%) of school staff who intervene when students make disparaging comments about a fellow classmate's gender expression. It is no wonder, then, that an astounding "82 percent of trans students felt unsafe at schools" (Teich, 2012, p. 105). We hope the research presented here will begin a conversation about how schools can become safer spaces for trans\* and gender creative youth. Our approach attempts to integrate the use of popular media with the scholarship on methods of teaching English and with the secondary English curriculum and standards.

### ***Transparent Pedagogy***

We interviewed six members of *Transparent*'s creative team to learn about the creative process of producing the show, the writing process involved in developing the scripts, and the public pedagogy the show's success engenders (Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011). Participants were chosen to represent a broad spectrum of roles within the creative team (three writers, two producers, and one editor) and also to represent a wide experience of gender and sexuality (two transwomen, one transman, one cis straight man, one cis gay woman, and one cis straight woman). We hope that this diverse group provides varied perspectives that both enrich the quality and depth of our data and reveal different approaches for addressing our research questions.

We asked each interviewee a series of questions about how *Transparent* potentially teaches viewers about trans\* experiences. One question asked them to choose a scene that would best illustrate or provoke discussions among secondary school students about trans\* experiences. Although we do not view the participants as experienced pedagogues, we believe that they are experts in the experiences of trans\* individuals and that they can also speak to the aspirational aspects of the show. We believe that because they are among *Transparent*'s creators, producers, editors, advisors, and writers, they are the best people to speak to how they hoped it would illuminate the complex and sometimes difficult experiences of trans\* individuals.

During their interviews, each of the participants indicated that the show intends to teach the public about trans\* experiences and that this focus remains an important emphasis throughout their work in the writers' room. *Transparent* employs both trans\* and cisgender writers, editors, and producers; in addition, the show's creative team reads and discusses a great deal of trans\*studies scholarship and other material on trans\* experiences. Though the cisgender members of the team lack the lived experience of being trans\*, they self-identify as trans\* allies who vehemently advocate for increasing public understanding of trans\* experiences.

*Transparent* offers its viewers an opportunity to understand the various dimensions of trans\* experiences. It also presents secondary English teachers with an opportunity to integrate issues of gender and sexuality into an inclusive curriculum. During the interviews, we asked only one question regarding the pedagogical aspects of the show for secondary students because we wanted to explore other facets of it as well. In addition, as former high school English teachers, we realize that secondary English teachers have limited time to include trans\* topics in the ELA classroom. The participants selected five different scenes from season one to highlight some of Maura's specific struggles and triumphs. In turn, we designed ELA lessons based on those scenes, which align with the best practices of teaching secondary ELA and incorporate literature and writing.

Each lesson begins with a description of the scene, followed by a discussion of the reasons the participant selected it. Next, we provide a detailed description of the lesson, including suggested procedures for teaching it, and we state which of the CCSS aligns with it. Although there are limitations to the CCSS (Beach & Thein, 2012), we acknowledge that many secondary English teachers plan their daily lessons within the framework of those standards. Thus, we are compelled to think pragmatically about how to prepare teachers to infuse issues related to trans\* students into curriculum that aligns with the CCSS.

The criteria we used in deciding which standards to incorporate were whether they were applicable to visual literacy and whether students could master them by writing in various genres. Together, the lessons offer a wide variety of literacy activities and cohere with the dual goals of teaching both trans\* and cisgender students about trans\* experiences as part of the ELA curriculum and helping students master grade 9–10 writing standards.

Though educators could teach one or two of these lessons in isolation, we strongly suggest that they integrate the lessons into a larger unit focused on civil rights and social justice, encouraging students to draw on their prior knowledge and fostering their ability to make connections among various human rights issues. Additionally, the four lessons work together to focus on trans\* identities, critical literacy, and writing in different genres. Collectively, the artifacts the lessons generate can be combined to create a multigenre paper. As Romano (2000) has shown, writing multigenre papers increases student engagement and writing quality.

We also recognize that as cisgender males (one straight, one gay), we are writing on a topic with which we cannot personally identify. As such, we call to mind the important work of Paris and Winn (2014), who advocate for humanizing research methods and who argue that “to understand what it means to

‘humanize’ research, it is important to consider the ways in which people, and more specifically youth, are often ‘dehumanized’” (p. 1). Transgender studies scholar and historian Susan Stryker (2008) also points out the need to recognize the humanity of trans\* people: “[a] gender-changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity and loss of humanness” (p. 6).

Attentiveness to the threat of dehumanization generates valid concerns about how our gendernormative identities may skew the research, or even worse, render it illegitimate. However, we borrow from Miller’s (2015b) queer literacy framework (QLF) to frame our project. Miller comments:

As adolescents come to see their realities reflected, affirmed, and made legible both through literacy practices in the classroom and society writ large, self-determination and, hence, a queer autonomy can be realized . . . teachers who take up a QLF framework can be agents for social, political, and personal transformation. (p. 38)

With this in mind, we position ourselves as cisgender allies to the struggles of trans\* people, and specifically trans\* youth. We hope that our experiences working with trans\* youths in the ELA classroom, adherence to a QLF, 16 years of collective secondary ELA teaching experience, and being self-conscious in conducting “humanizing” research will result in lessons that advocate for trans\* people.

School communities and teachers can also take up a QLF to address trans\* issues through their teaching. This is increasingly important because of trans\* students’ vulnerability to violence. We believe that it is our ethical responsibility as secondary English teachers to consider how best to teach trans\* issues within the secondary ELA curriculum to ensure that all students have a safe and dynamic learning environment. Taking trans\* students’ needs, wants, and interests into consideration when planning that curriculum is essential.

In order to contextualize the lessons and make them more comprehensible, we offer a brief summary of the *Transparent* plot and a description of its characters.

Maura, played by cisgender male Jeffrey Tambor, discloses to her children that she is transitioning after 70 years of passing as a man. Maura’s three grown children support her transition in different ways. Each of them also struggles with their own gender and sexual identity throughout the show.

Shortly after Maura's transition, her oldest child, Sarah, leaves her husband and father of their two young children to live with her college girlfriend, Tammy. The second oldest, Josh, performs hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) in a futile attempt to maintain the status quo. The youngest, Ali, defies gender and sexual binaries, never settling on any fixed gender or sexual identity. These characters play significant roles in Maura's transition, and they provide insights into the ways in which students could potentially relate to shifting sexual and gender identities.

The next section of this paper examines each of the five scenes and describes related ELA lessons for the secondary classroom.

### **Scene 1: "This Is Me"**

In the opening scene of episode 1.2, Maura, wearing women's clothes, returns home from her trans\* support group and accidentally stumbles upon Sarah and Tammy in the bedroom, kissing. Sarah asks Maura, "Are you going to start dressing up as a lady all the time?" Maura responds, "No, honey, all my life, my whole life, I've been dressing up like a man. This is me."

Four of the participants named this scene as an important moment for teaching adolescents about trans\* people. The primary reason they selected it is because it crystallizes Maura's experience as a trans\* person in a way that uninitiated viewers can understand. Editor Catherine Haight, for example, states, "Somehow, people get that [scene]. [It] makes sense in people's minds." For people who have never knowingly interacted with a trans\* person, this scene humanizes Maura and makes her legible in a way that allows access into her experiences.

### **Lesson 1: Letter-Writing to Learn**

The lesson based on this scene seeks to encourage students to critically evaluate the delimiting factors of sociohistorical gender constructions while simultaneously validating trans\* identities. Miller (2015b) writes that a QLF addresses "how teachers can support students to understand and read (a)gender and (a)sexuality through a queer lens" (p. 37). This lesson employs a QLF to empower teachers and students to advocate for trans\* students by supporting all students as they learn to recognize and understand trans\* identities. It also aligns with the CCSS to promote lucid expression of complex texts.

Queer theory and transgender theory thus provide the theoretical basis for this lesson. Queer theory argues that sexuality and gender expression are fluid and situated (Butler 1999, 2004; Foucault, 1978). Similarly, as Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, explain, “Transgender theory suggests that the lived experiences of individuals, including their negotiations of multiple intersectional identities, may empower them without confining them to any particular identity category” (p. 439).

The lesson begins by reviewing some important vocabulary necessary for understanding the scene. Key words that allow students to engage in this lesson include *gender*, *sex*, *trans\**, *masculinity*, *femininity*, *fluidity*, *assigned gender*, and *sociobistorical*. After a discussion of this vocabulary, the students are invited to use some of these words in their response to the following prompt: Without taking the anatomy of the body into account, how do you know a person’s gender? Students are first asked to share their responses with their table partners and then invited to discuss their opinions with the whole class. Next, students work in groups of four or five as they respond to the following question: What do you know about trans\* identities? Each group creates a response, which can be a written statement, a drawing, a concept map, or a list showing their prior knowledge of trans\* identities, and then presents it to the entire class.

After completing these presentations, the class critically views the “This is me” scene and then watches Lee Mokobe, a young transman, perform his poem about what it feels like to be trans\*<sup>3</sup>. Afterward, the students respond to one of the following prompts: (1) How do you understand the ways in which Maura and Lee know their gender identity?, (2) What do you think Maura and Lee may have struggled with as they were socialized in an assigned gender that was not theirs?, or (3) Predict moments of victory or triumph Maura or Lee may have experienced as their authentic gender. To conclude the lesson, students compose a letter to Maura or Lee in which they explain how Maura or Lee’s coming out experiences have helped them understand trans\* identities. The letter could also include ideas about how to help fight discrimination against trans\* people in the local community.

## Scene 2: The Bathroom

During this scene, Maura and her two daughters, Ali and Sarah, are in line at a public ladies’ room in a local shopping mall. While they’re waiting, Sarah says, “Dad, if you have to go in front of me, that’s fine.” A teenage girl overhears this comment and tells her mother that the person standing in line may

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3 Mokobe’s performance is available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/lee\\_mokobe\\_a\\_powerful\\_poem\\_about\\_what\\_it\\_feels\\_like\\_to\\_be\\_transgender?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/lee_mokobe_a_powerful_poem_about_what_it_feels_like_to_be_transgender?language=en).



be a man. The mother confronts Maura, saying, “Sir, can you hear me? Because this is the ladies’ ladies’ restroom, and clearly that is a man.” Sarah engages in the confrontation with the mother and says, “This is my father, and he’s a woman. And he has every right to be in this bathroom.” “No, he does not,” the mother responds, “And you know what? I’m calling security because there are young women in here—that you are traumatizing.” Depending on the ages of the students in the class or the school culture, the scene may need to be stopped here because it ends with Sarah shouting profanities.

Transparent producer Zackary Drucker selected this scene because of its centrality to genderqueer and trans\* experiences. She explains, “Bathrooms are ground zero for trans\* people.” Writer Noah Harpster explains in some detail about what he learned in the writers’ room:

[The bathroom] is currently a national debate, but when we first began in the writers’ room—I learned that finding a safe restroom is one of the most common struggles for trans\* and gender-nonconforming people. It is a frequent point of fear.

Much recent scholarship on gender acknowledges that for trans\* people, public bathrooms are sites of conflict, danger, and potential threats (Girshick, 2008; Halberstam, 1998; Ingrey, 2012; Rassmussen, 2009). Further, Halberstam (1998) has pointed out that the restroom is a space in which female gender is policed by feminine women enforcing gender conformity. Maura’s experience in this scene demonstrates the challenges that trans\* people endure because the public restroom has the capacity to reinscribe gender norms (Blackburn & Smith, 2010).

Both Harpster and Drucker recommend showing this scene to adolescents to teach them about trans\* experiences because it has the potential to illustrate how a common event (using a public bathroom) can be a terrifying and threatening experience for many trans\* people. Maura’s experience in the women’s restroom is partially mitigated because she has a strong ally, her daughter Sarah. Nonetheless, the scene illustrates how misunderstanding trans\* people produces bigotry and malice. Teachers can use this scene as an opportunity to inform students that transgenderism is not a pathology but instead an indication of the limits of norms perpetuated by a gender binary. They can also explain that, as Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) contend, “The depathologizing of transgenderism . . . does not remove the problem of transgender individuals having to deal with the pervasive and pernicious transphobia that exists in society” (p. 438).

Writer Ali Liebegott points out that Sarah’s defense of Maura offers an important teaching moment for young trans\* or queer people. Liebegott explains, “When Sarah defends Maura in the bathroom, I

think that's very powerful in a way that you have allies. You're gonna be alright . . . It's not the end of the world." Liebegott emphasizes the significance the support of loved ones plays as trans\* and queer people negotiate the worlds in which they live. Trans\* youth have an especially high risk for depression and suicide, so it is profoundly important for them to witness moments when trans\* allies show public support.

However, this scene emerges as a more complicated teaching moment because Sarah misgenders Maura, using male pronouns to refer to her. This moment illustrates one way that loving allies must also evolve their language when people transition. With regard to classroom pedagogy, the scene thus serves a triple purpose: it shows the bigotry trans\* people are forced to face in a space they already approach with fear and apprehension, the unconscious difficulty allies have adjusting their language when someone is transitioning, and the power that advocacy has for validating trans\* identities.

## **Lesson 2: Collaborative Recognition through Poetry**

The goal of the ELA lesson based on this scene is to have students critique transphobia. The lesson employs a QLF and assists in reworking "social and classroom norms where bodies with differential realities in classrooms are legitimated and made legible to self and other" (Miller, 2015b, p. 37). It aligns with the CCSS that promotes collaborative discussions that challenge one's views while simultaneously building on others' ideas. The bathroom scene offers educators the opportunity to make trans\* bodies legible by compelling students to recognize and contextualize trans\* experiences. Depending on the age group and experiences of the students, it may help to teach the words *heteronormative* and bigotry before the lesson.

The class begins by responding to the following questions: Should everyone have the right to use a public bathroom? Why or why not? Why do we have bathrooms assigned to specific genders? What challenges do you think trans\* people may have in using public bathrooms? How do you think trans\* people feel about using a public bathroom? Using a concentric circles or fishbowl protocol (see Milner, Milner, & Mitchell, 2011) facilitates a student-led discussion.

The class is informed that they will be watching a scene during which a trans\* woman attempts to use a public restroom. Once the scene is over, students reflect on why a woman claims that Maura does not belong in the women's restroom and demands that Maura leave. The class engages in a discussion based on the following questions: Why does the woman believe Maura is violating the bathroom

space? Why does the woman call Maura a “pervert”? What are the implications of the word “pervert”? Based on her response to Maura, what do the woman’s views about gender identity appear to be? What are the counterarguments to her claims?

The class discusses these questions in small groups, and to foster further conversation about this scene, each group composes one question they would like to ask Maura, Sarah, or the woman who tells Maura to leave the bathroom. If the teacher has elected to cut the scene before Sarah uses profanity, students can be asked to predict what happens next or to explain what they would do if they were in that situation. Stopping the scene before it ends could also be an opportunity to have students dramatize the conclusion and provide alternative and even more empowering endings (Wilhelm, 2016).

After students reflect on these questions and share those they wrote, the teacher distributes copies of “Let America be America Again,” by Langston Hughes and “A cut won’t kill me,” by Bo Luengsurawat. A close reading of both poems could stimulate the discovery of connections between the experiences that Maura endured while waiting in the bathroom and the experiences of the speakers in the poems.

After the class has read the poems, they have a discussion based on the following questions that challenge students’ ideas about gender identity: How might Maura’s experiences as a trans\* person correlate with the experiences of groups represented in the poems? In what ways does the bathroom scene resonate with other patterns of oppression in the United States? If there were a trans\* student or teacher at this school, how would that affect the way you view gendered bathrooms? How would you react if you were in a public restroom with a trans\* person? How do these poems help you understand challenges that trans\* people face?

After students write about these questions, they exchange their responses with a classmate and respond in a journal to the following prompts: Do you agree or disagree with what your classmate wrote? Why or why not? How have your partners’ responses offered an alternative view of trans\* issues? After students finish writing their responses, the journals rotate to another student reviewer, who responds in writing to the prompts and to the first reviewer’s ideas. After the second reviewer writes in the journals, they are returned to their owners and each student reads their classmates’ questions and thoughts. The students then write their reactions to the feedback they received.

The lesson culminates with students composing a poem that challenges prejudice against trans\* people. The students may use the question they wrote earlier in the lesson (the one they would like to ask

Maura, Sarah, or the other woman in the bathroom) as the opening line of the poem. Students can also pluck words, lines, images, and ideas from their own responses and from peer comments to create a type of found poem that wonders about, reports, questions, or denounces prejudice against trans\* individuals.

### **Scene 3: Support Scenes**

This lesson involves two different scenes that depict belonging. The first scene takes place near the end of episode 1.1, when Maura attends a trans\* support group at the Los Angeles LGBTQ Community Center. During the scene, Maura reveals a moment of victory when she recounts being asked for an ID while using a credit card. The clerk accepts her ID, which depicts her as a man, and completes the transaction. Maura describes this moment as a “big victory.” This scene also presents a diverse population of trans\* people and provides an example of how the trans\* community relies on each other for support.

The scene paired with this one occurs in episode 1.2, when Maura visits her friend Davina’s apartment. Davina is a transwoman who transitioned several years earlier, and during a conversation with Maura, she says, “You know sweetie, this is a really big journey that we’re on, and you’ve just started on it so you gotta learn to let go of everything that anybody thinks of you . . . In five years you’re going to look up and not one of your family members is still going to be there. Not one.” Davina reveals an unfortunate reality for many trans\* people: the queer community often becomes their (only) family after they transition.

Writers Ali Liebegott and Our Lady J comment that both the support group scene and the scene in which Maura visits Davina illustrate safe spaces and the ways that more experienced trans\* people mentor the newly transitioning. Our Lady J explains why she chose these scenes to teach adolescents about trans\* experiences: “The scenes with Davina [reflect what] happens in her community. We have mothers—adopted mothers and adopted children, where we teach each other the ropes of transitioning . . . That’s how we learn. Davina does that for Maura.” Although Davina is considerably younger than Maura, she mentors Maura as Maura journeys into her trans\* identity. Our Lady J posits that these scenes remind the viewer that “there’s this amazing community of trans\* people and Maura asking Davina all these questions. In her apartment is the first time we see it.” Our Lady J implies that the scenes demonstrate the enduring support in the trans\* community.

Similarly, Liebegott believes that the support group scene possesses important pedagogical moments because it serves as a reminder to people transitioning “that there’s a whole world [comprised of gender queer and trans\* people.]” Liebegott and Our Lady J strongly contend that it is important that gender-nonnormative adolescents know that a community of people just like them exists. As Liebegott said, “They [trans\* adolescents] need hope.” Both of these women believe the television show offers adolescents positive examples of the trans\* community, and they hope that a durable and tight community of trans\* people will help trans\* children negotiate many of the challenges they may face.

### **Lesson 3: Creating Support Structures in Monologues and Collages**

The lesson based on the support scene articulates the value of support for the trans\* community. The lesson uses a QLF (Miller, 2015b) to enable teachers to offer an opportunity for support and make legible the growing number of youth who identify outside normative gender and sexual classifications. It also aligns with the CCSS that helps secondary ELA students produce cohesive writing based on appropriate evidence. Students draw on their prior experiences as well as their understanding of the scenes to create monologues or collages to explore the value of mentorship and support in the trans\* community.

The lesson begins as students respond to the following prompt: Think of a time when you or someone you know needed help in order to overcome a difficult experience. This experience could include people’s perceptions or biases regarding your ability, your ethnic background, your gender, or your age. Take five minutes to write the story of the events that transpired during this time. You must write for five minutes without stopping. Volunteers then read their narratives to the whole class, and the teacher lists common motifs and draws a two-circle Venn diagram. Next, students watch the support and mentorship scenes critically. As a class, students use the Venn diagram to organize how their personal experiences and the scenes from *Transparent* converge and diverge. The teacher points out the common experiences that all people share when faced with difficult circumstances.

Students then discuss the following prompts in small groups: Why is the support group important for Maura? Why would a trans\* person’s family no longer be present five years after transition? What do you think about this? What does Davina gain from providing support for Maura? What does Maura gain from Davina’s support? Where do you foresee trans\* people succeeding and struggling in their public lives? How would you feel if your assigned gender did not match your authentic gender? What

challenges would this pose? Write on the whiteboard one question that you would like to ask Maura or Davina. After the students have discussed all of the prompts and have written their questions on the board, they use the Venn diagram, one of those questions, and their discussion to create either a monologue or collage.

The prompt for the monologue is: Your monologue must be between one and two minutes; you must write it in first person as Maura or Davina. To get you started, choose one of the questions the class created and answer the question as if you were Maura or Davina. Imagine that she is talking to this class about the importance of support in managing life's struggles. As you continue writing your monologue, rely on your experience in receiving and providing support and also incorporate the challenges people like Maura and Davina face in their daily lives. Once the students finish writing, volunteers read their monologues to the class while the teacher provides specific feedback.

Writing and performing the monologues is intended to make it possible for students to embody and empathize with trans\* lived experiences. However, the performances have the potential to mock those who identify as trans\*. Teachers need to use their discretion in having cisgender students perform monologues as trans\* people.

The prompt for the collage assignment is: Create a collage in which you depict an aspect of trans\* lived experience. The collage can focus on the importance of support, depict challenges and prejudices that trans\* people endure, or illustrate the ways that cisgender youth allies can work for trans\* equity to combat transphobia. After students complete their collage, they write an interpretation of it and detail how it represents the experiences of trans\* people or the possible actions of cisgender youth allies. Student volunteers share their collages.

The lesson concludes with a discussion of the students' experiences in creating the collage or writing the monologue, and teachers provide students with a list of resources for trans\* youth and their allies.

## **Scene 4: Restaurant Scene**

When asked which scene she would show to teach adolescents about gender, Liebegott chose a scene from episode 1.5 in which Maura, Davina, and their friend Shea (also a transwoman) enjoy drinks at a local restaurant. As they converse about Shea's transition, a cisgender man, Gary, approaches their table and proceeds to flirt with Shea. As he banters with Shea, Maura, who recognizes him as one of

her former colleagues at UCLA, says, “Hi, Gary.” Gary addresses her as Mort, raising his voice and bursting into uncontrollable laughter. Maura stands her ground and asks Gary about his wife, to which Gary turns and walks away. Ultimately, Shea rejects him, and Gary retreats from the restaurant.

Liebegott cites this scene as an important one to teach adolescents about trans\* experiences because she believes it shows hope for trans\* youth in that it is “very powerful. She’s [Maura’s] not beaten by him. They also aren’t really having him. That kind of solidarity I think is awesome.” The scene represents a moment of triumph for Maura as the women repudiate Gary’s bigotry and it simultaneously signifies the unity of the trans\* community.

## **Lesson 4: Dramatic Embodiment of Mediation**

The ELA lesson based on this scene analyzes Maura’s victory in the restaurant by comparing it to similar themes in Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise,” and queer poet Andrea Gibson’s poem, “Letter to the Playground Bully from Andrea (age 8).” The lesson culminates with students composing and dramatizing short scenes which depict how to mediate bullying of trans\* youth. The lesson offers strategies for combating bullying and aligns with the QLF, affirming the gender diversity in secondary ELA classrooms. It also aligns with the CCSS that promote discussion of key themes in different artistic modalities.

To begin this lesson, the teacher writes the following questions in different places on the board: What is bullying? How do you recognize bullying when you see it? What is the difference between teasing and bullying? How do you respond when someone is being bullied? Students discuss these questions using a chalk talk protocol, silently questioning and responding to one another on either a whiteboard or chart paper.<sup>4</sup>

After completing the chalk talk activity, the class discusses the themes emerging from the conversation. The teacher then informs the students that after examining different types of bullying, they will be asked to synthesize them into a unifying statement. First, the students watch Andrea Gibson perform “Letter to the Playground Bully from Andrea (age 8).”<sup>5</sup> Then they read the poem, creating annotations for phrases that relate to any of the themes from the chalk talk.

Next, the students watch the restaurant scene and note any similarities that they see between it and

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4 For an example of chalk talk, see “Chalk Talk: Management in the Active Classroom,” <https://vimeo.com/101254151>.

5 Gibson’s performance is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clm8w8\\_eOnc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clm8w8_eOnc)



“Letter to the Playground Bully.” Then they watch a video of Maya Angelou reading “And Still I Rise.”<sup>6</sup> Afterward, they read and annotate it, identifying themes that it has in common with the restaurant scene and “Letter to the Playground Bully.” Groups of four or five students discuss the similarities among the works and compose one unifying thematic statement synthesizing the three of them.

Using their unifying statements as a ground, the students work together, writing 3–5 minute scenes about bullying. They begin by generating a word bank for the scenes from the comments produced during the chalk talk activity. The scenes should deal with acts of bullying that occur at school and in communities and demonstrate strategies to oppose those behaviors. After the students perform their scenes, the groups discuss the question, What can we do as a community to eliminate bullying?, and create a poster that outlines five specific steps their school community can take.

### **Culminating Activity: Multigenre Paper for Trans\* People, Trans\* Allies, and Social Justice**

All of the artifacts these lessons produce can be assembled together to create a multigenre paper that represents the lived experiences of trans\* people and strategies their cisgender allies can use to advocate for social justice. Educators should also consider publishing these projects to promote equity within the school community. Publishing on a class website, in the classroom, and in a public space in the school demonstrates support for trans\* youth and validates queer or questioning students’ identities (Blackburn, 2006). Public recognition of trans\* lives helps to establish an inclusive learning environment. The scholarly literature has shown that inclusivity is paramount for creating positive school experiences for LGBTQ students (Blackburn, 2006).

### **Impact of Inclusion**

We believe that it is the moral responsibility of all schools and educators to create environments in which all children feel safe and can be successful. When the classroom fails to represent queer students, they are increasingly likely to disengage from learning (Blackburn, 2005; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Carlson, 2015; Carlson & Linville, 2015; Miller, 2015a, 2015b). However, a merely superficial classroom representation of sexual and gender diversity is not enough to produce feelings of inclusiveness among LGBTQ students (Blackburn, 2006). With this in mind, the lessons we outline employ a QLF to encourage legibility and recognition of gender diversity within the student body in order to both

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6 Angelou’s performance is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqOqo50LSZ0>



increase literacy and promote inclusivity. Miller (2015b) emphasizes an overarching goal of a QLF: “As adolescents come to see their realities reflected, affirmed, and made legible both through literacy practices in the classroom and society writ large, self-determination and, hence, a queer autonomy can be realized” (p. 38).

The primary purpose of these lessons is to encourage empathy and connection among all students and to allow everyone to feel represented in the classroom. Though attention to LGBTQ issues is a mandated element of teacher preparation social justice standards (Miller, 2015b), ongoing concerns about the safety of trans\* students, remind us that much work still needs to be done.

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